VERTIGO

CINDERELLA

FABLES ARE FOREVER

3

Jun '11
suggested for
mature readers
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CHRIS
ROBERSON

SHAWN
MCMANUS

Thailand, 1984.
MOST PEOPLE GO TO RESORTS TO RELAX. THEY SWIM, SURF, SUNBATHE-- ENJOY THEMSELVES, IN OTHER WORDS.
NOT ME. I WENT TO THE MOST EXCLUSIVE RESORT ON THE PLANET TO WORK.
I CAME LOOKING FOR A LITTLE OLD LADY WHO KNEW ALL THE SECRETS OF AN ENTIRE COMMUNITY OF FABLES HIDDEN BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN--A "SHADOW FABLETOWN."
I FOUND HER EASILY ENOUGH. I AM A PROFESSIONAL, AFTER ALL.
UNFORTUNATELY, THAT WASN'T ALL I FOUND.
WHAT'S THE MATTER, CINDERELLA?
CHESHIRE CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE?
THE LAST TIME I'D SEEN DOROTHY GALE, I'D BEEN LUCKY TO ESCAPE IN ONE PIECE.
OF COURSE, THIS TIME SHE DIDN'T HAVE A DRAGON TO BACK HER UP, WHICH SERVED TO EVEN UP THE ODDS A BIT.

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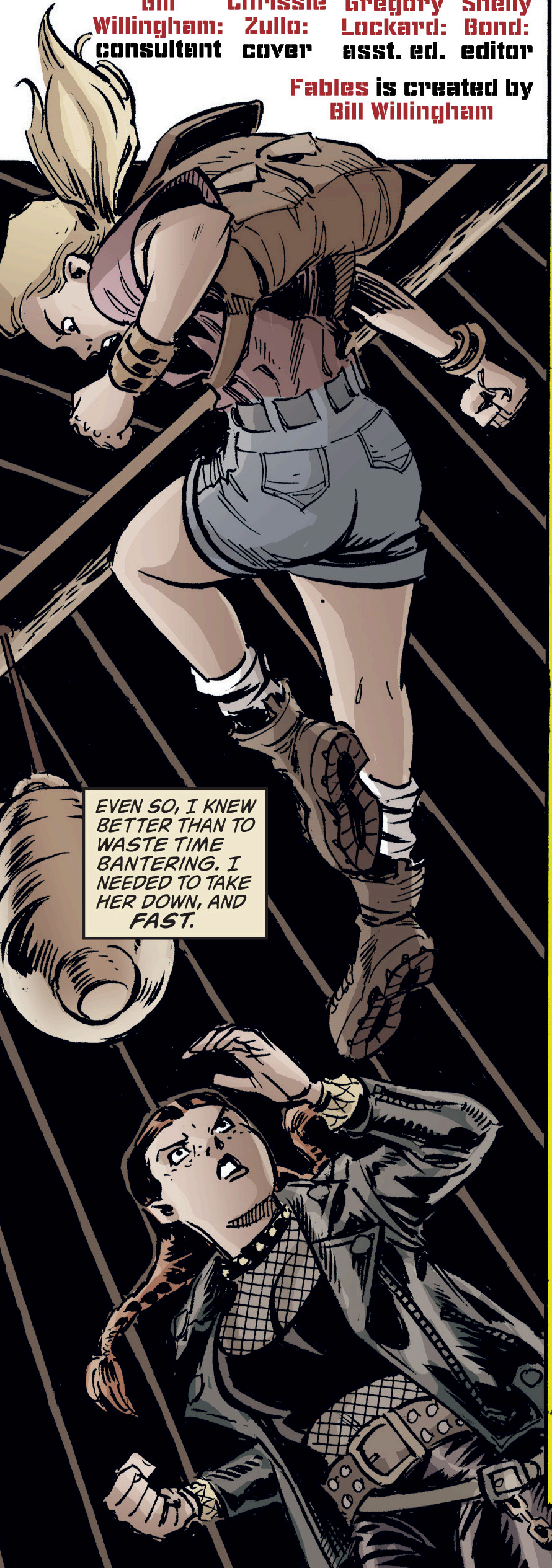
– PART THREE –

Chris Roberson: writer
Shawn McManus: artist
Lee Loughridge: colors
Todd Klein: letters
Bill Willingham: consultant
Chrissie Zullo: cover
Gregory Lockard: asst. ed.
Shelly Bond: editor

Fables is created by Bill Willingham


EVEN SO, I KNEW BETTER THAN TO WASTE TIME BANTERING. I NEEDED TO TAKE HER DOWN, AND *FAST.*

EASIER SAID THAN DONE.
CINDERELLA, IF I DIDN'T ***KNOW*** BETTER I'D THINK YOU WEREN'T HAPPY TO ***SEE*** ME.
OH, I'M ***DELIGHTED*** TO SEE YOU, DOROTHY.
I HAVE LOADS OF QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO ANSWER, JUST AS SOON AS I FINISH KICKING YOUR ***ASS.***
KTHUD

THONK
UNGH
OOOH.
YOU STUCK-UP CITY GIRLS ARE ALL ALIKE. YOU THINK THAT, JUST BECAUSE SOMEONE IS A LITTLE BIT COUNTRY, THEY CAN'T ROCK-AND-ROLL.
SERIOUSLY?
YOU DRESS LIKE SOME KIND OF PUNK ROCKER, AND YOU'RE QUOTING DONNY AND MARIE?!
FWOOOSH
KLANG!
YOU BITCH. THAT HURT!
OH, GREAT.
I HARDLY THINK THAT MISS GALE'S TASTE IN FASHION OR MUSIC--HOWEVER QUESTIONABLE--IS GERMANE AT THE MOMENT.

YOU WILL PLEASE REFRAIN FROM ANY MOVEMENT.
I MAY ONLY HAVE FOUR OF THE SEVEN BROTHERS AT MY DISPOSAL, BUT I EXPECT THEY SHOULD PROVE *MORE* THAN A MATCH FOR YOU, MISS CINDERELLA.
IT WAS THE PERFECT EXAMPLE OF BIGBY'S FOURTH RULE OF ENGAGEMENT: NEVER START A FIGHT YOU CAN'T WIN.
FINE, YOU WIN.
BIGBY'S SEVENTH RULE ALSO APPLIED: NEVER WALK INTO A ROOM YOU DON'T KNOW HOW TO EXIT.
FORTUNATELY, I'D GOTTEN TOTENKINDER TO WHIP ME UP A LITTLE ESCAPE HATCH BEFORE HEADING TO THAILAND.
SORRY TO RUN WHEN THE PARTY'S JUST GETTING STARTED, BUT *YOU* KNOW HOW IT IS.
SMACK!
FSSSSSS
THE MISSION WAS MORE OR LESS A COMPLETE FAILURE. BUT I *DID* LEARN ONE THING.
DOROTHY GALE WAS SERIOUS BUSINESS. AND I KNEW I'D BE SEEING HER AGAIN.

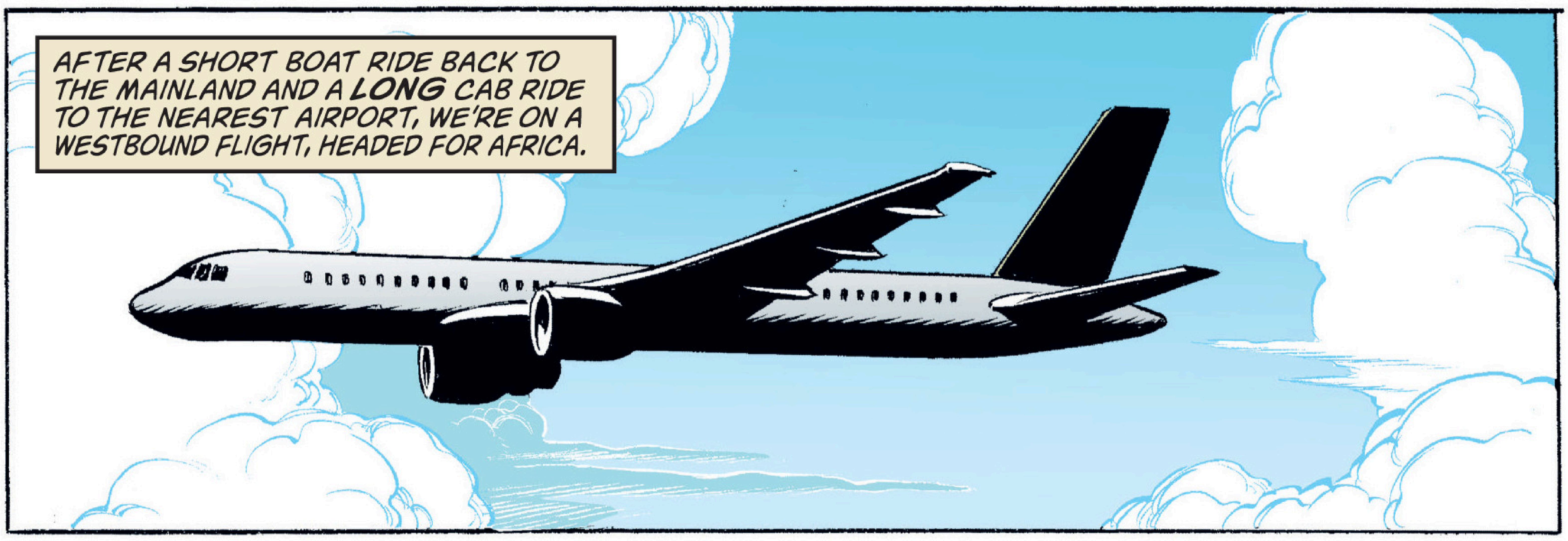
Thailand, Now.
NO SIGN OF DOROTHY YET, BUT IF I HAD ANY DOUBTS THAT SHE WAS STILL ALIVE AND KICKING, THEY ARE QUICKLY BEING DISPELLED.
THE VILE BEASTIE HOT ON OUR HEELS IS FROM DOROTHY'S OLD STOMPING GROUNDS--OZ.
THE CHISS IS DEADLY.
BUT THAT'S OKAY.
SO AM I.
THOSE QUILLS IT'S SPORTING SECRETE A FAST-ACTING POISON. WORSE YET, THE CHISS IS CAPABLE OF SHOOTING ITS QUILLS AT WILL.
THE ONLY THING KEEPING ME AND IVAN ALIVE AT THE MOMENT IS THE FACT THAT IT TAKES THE CHISS A FEW MOMENTS TO "RECHARGE" BETWEEN FIRINGS.

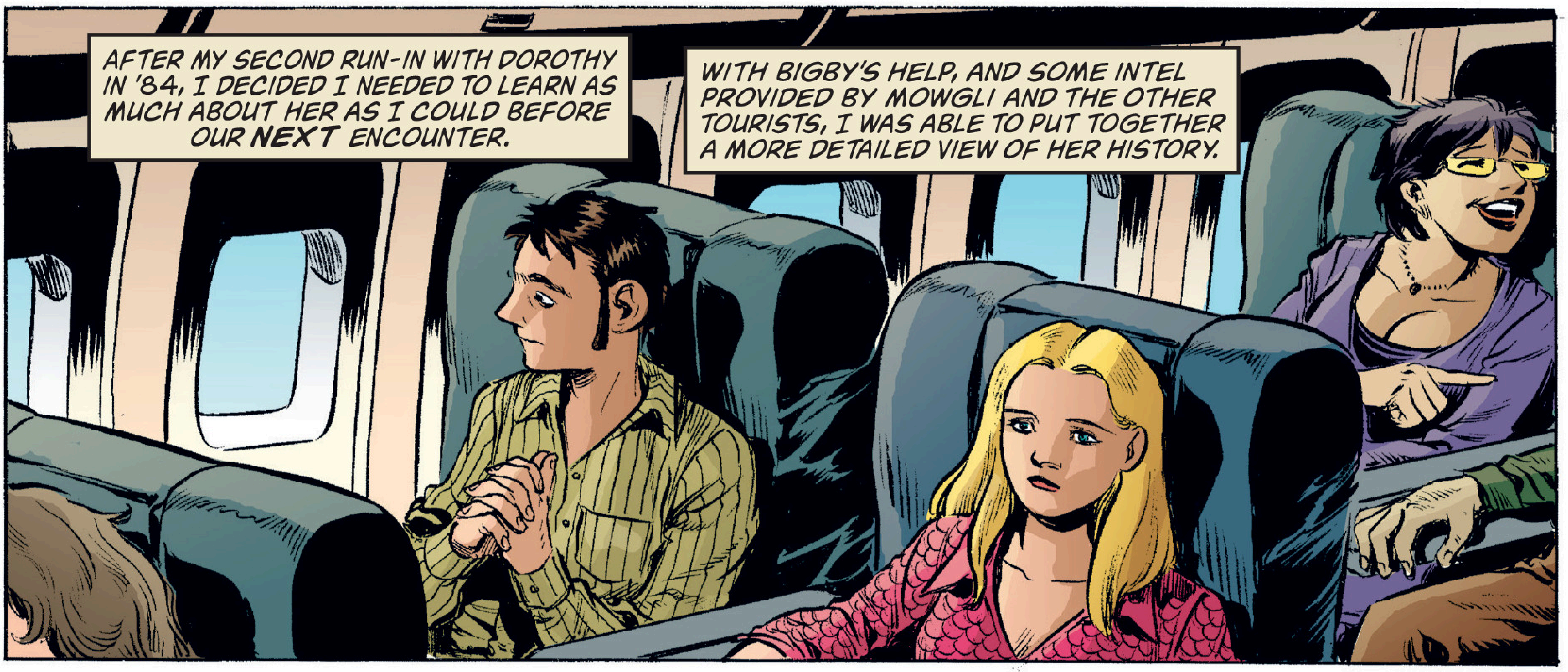
JUST ONE OF THOSE QUILLS WAS ABLE TO DROP MADAME MENG IN AN EYEBLINK.
SO MUCH FOR HER TELLING US HOW TO TRACK DOROTHY DOWN.
CINDY?! WHAT ARE YOU *WAITING* FOR?!
COME ON, LET'S GET *OUT* OF HERE!
WE'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO OUTRUN IT, IVAN. NOT THROUGH *THIS* JUNGLE.
I'VE ONLY GOT A FEW SECONDS UNTIL THE CHISS IS ABLE TO FIRE ANOTHER ROUND OF QUILLS, SO I'VE GOT TO TIME THIS *JUST* RIGHT.

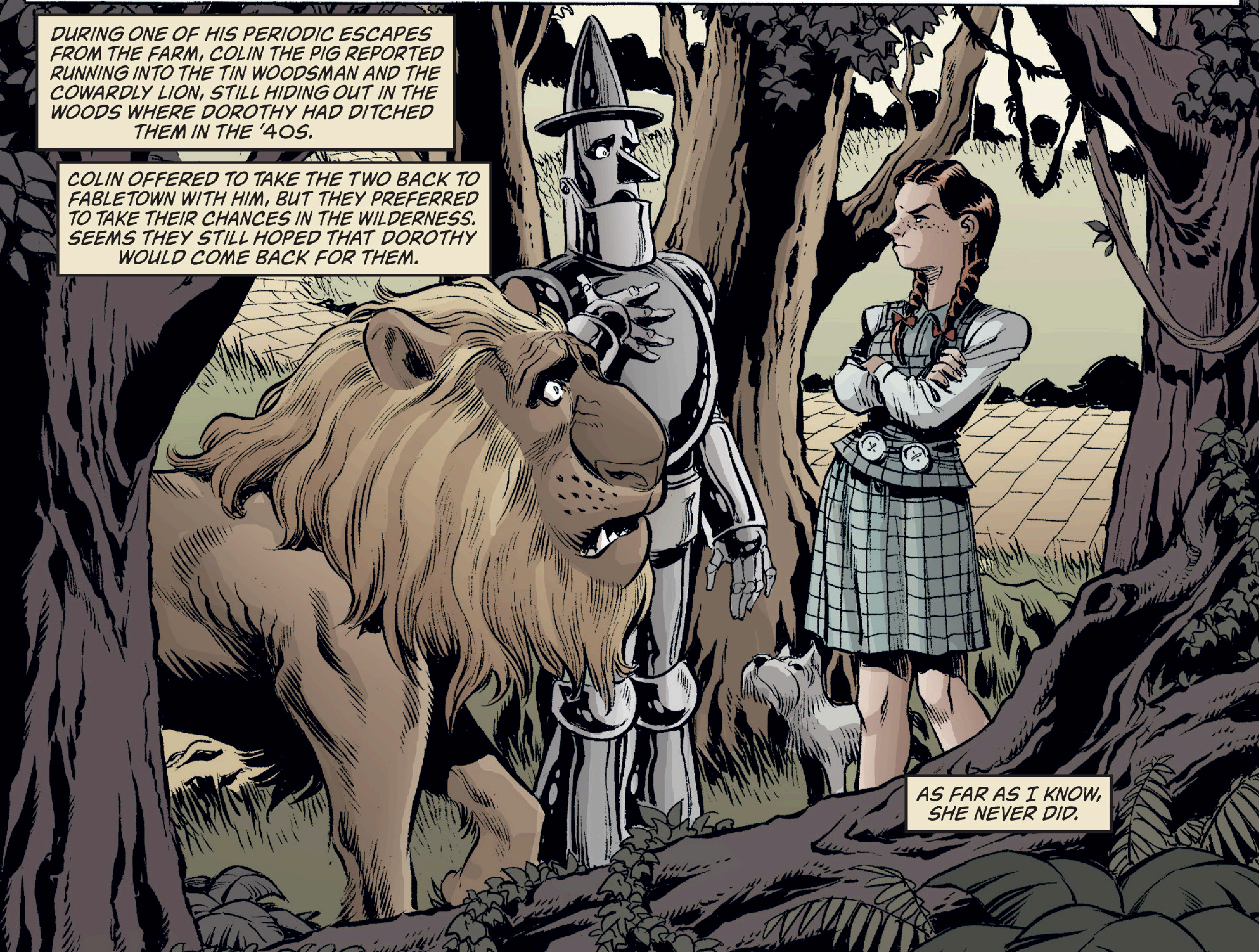
COME ON, YOU BASTARD. JUST A *LITTLE* CLOSER.
THIS LITTLE GIZMO OF MINE PACKS A **SERIOUS** PUNCH, BUT IT'S ONLY EFFECTIVE AT **VERY** SHORT RANGE.
SNORT
THAT'S CLOSE ENOUGH, I THINK.
FZZZ
OH, **NO. MISFIRE?!**
I MIGHT HAVE HATED FRAU TOTENKINDER'S GUTS, BUT EVER SINCE SHE TOOK OFF IT'S BEEN **IMPOSSIBLE** TO GET GOOD EQUIPMENT.
CINDY! **LOOK OUT!!**
SSSSSS

IT'S ABOUT TO SHOOT!
UNGH!
FWUT
FWUT
FWUT
FWUT
OOOF.
THANKS TO IVAN'S TACKLE, ALL OF THE QUILLS GO WIDE OF THE MARK.
BUT JUST BECAUSE THE CHISS CAN'T SHOOT THEM AGAIN RIGHT AWAY DOESN'T MEAN IT CAN'T WALK UP AND STICK US WITH THEM.
COME ON, COME ON, WORK, DAMMIT!
HWOOOOOWL!
KRRRZAAACK!

IN A MATTER OF SECONDS, ALL THAT WAS LEFT OF THE CHISS WAS A PILE OF ASH.
THANKS, IVAN. SERIOUSLY... THANKS. WHEN MY GIZMO MISFIRED I THOUGHT I WAS **DONE** FOR.
WHAT, DID YOU THINK I'D JUST STAND BY AND LET IT **KILL** YOU?
BEFORE YOU THREW YOURSELF INTO HARM'S WAY? HONESTLY? YEAH, THAT'S **EXACTLY** WHAT I THOUGHT.
TOO BAD NEITHER OF US WAS QUICK ENOUGH TO SAVE MADAME MENG, OR WE'D...
HOLD **ON** A MINUTE.
APPARENTLY MENG WAS JUST **MOSTLY** DEAD WHEN SHE HIT THE GROUND.
LOOKS LIKE SHE HAD ENOUGH LIFE LEFT IN HER TO LEAVE US A MESSAGE.
WHAT IS THAT? A...A **SPIDER?**
NOT JUST **A** SPIDER, IVAN. **THE** SPIDER.
COME ON, MENG MANAGED TO TELL US WHERE WE NEED TO GO NEXT.


AFTER A SHORT BOAT RIDE BACK TO THE MAINLAND AND A **LONG** CAB RIDE TO THE NEAREST AIRPORT, WE'RE ON A WESTBOUND FLIGHT, HEADED FOR AFRICA.


AFTER MY SECOND RUN-IN WITH DOROTHY IN '84, I DECIDED I NEEDED TO LEARN AS MUCH ABOUT HER AS I COULD BEFORE OUR **NEXT** ENCOUNTER.
WITH BIGBY'S HELP, AND SOME INTEL PROVIDED BY MOWGLI AND THE OTHER TOURISTS, I WAS ABLE TO PUT TOGETHER A MORE DETAILED VIEW OF HER HISTORY.


DURING ONE OF HIS PERIODIC ESCAPES FROM THE FARM, COLIN THE PIG REPORTED RUNNING INTO THE TIN WOODSMAN AND THE COWARDLY LION, STILL HIDING OUT IN THE WOODS WHERE DOROTHY HAD DITCHED THEM IN THE '40S.
COLIN OFFERED TO TAKE THE TWO BACK TO FABLETOWN WITH HIM, BUT THEY PREFERRED TO TAKE THEIR CHANCES IN THE WILDERNESS. SEEMS THEY STILL HOPED THAT DOROTHY WOULD COME BACK FOR THEM.
AS FAR AS I KNOW, SHE NEVER DID.

THE NEXT REPORTED SIGHTING CAME IN PARIS, 1954, WHEN GENDARMES WERE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR AN AMERICAN WOMAN ANSWERING TO THE NAME OF "DOT GALE" IN CONNECTION WITH A SERIES OF MYSTERIOUS FIRES.
PROPERTY DAMAGE AS A RESULT OF THE FIRES WAS RELATIVELY LIMITED, BUT THE DEATH TOLL WAS **CONSIDERABLY** MORE EXTENSIVE.
AMONG THE DEAD WERE SIX MEN WHO WERE LATER DISCOVERED TO HAVE BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN A PLOT TO STEAL MILLIONS FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN DIAMOND MINE.
A WOMAN MATCHING DOROTHY'S DESCRIPTION WAS REPORTEDLY SIGHTED AMONG A PARTICULARLY BLOODTHIRSTY BAND OF MARXIST REBELS IN CENTRAL AMERICA IN THE EARLY '60S.
THE REBELS REFERRED TO THE WOMAN, WHO SERVED AS THEIR TACTICAL ADVISOR THROUGH SEVERAL NASTY CAMPAIGNS, ONLY AS "ZAPATOS DE PLATA" -- OR "SILVER SHOES."
BUT WHEN THE REBELS RAN OUT OF FUNDS TO **PAY** FOR HER SERVICES, THE WOMAN VANISHED, LEAVING THE REBELS TO THE GOVERNMENT'S TENDER MERCIES.
MY TWO ENCOUNTERS WITH DOROTHY GALE HAD TAUGHT ME THAT SHE WAS EVERY BIT AS SKILLED AND DANGEROUS AS **I** WAS.
BUT EVERYTHING I WAS ABLE TO FIND OUT ABOUT HER PAST EXPLOITS TOLD ME THERE WAS A CRUCIAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US.
I MIGHT KILL IN THE LINE OF DUTY, BUT DOROTHY KILLED FOR **MONEY**. I WAS A PATRIOT, BUT SHE WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A **MERCENARY**.

Burkina Faso, Now.
OUGADOUGOU. *OUGADOUGOU.* JUST SAYING THE NAME OF THIS CITY MAKES ME SMILE.
NOT EXACTLY A GARDEN SPOT, BUT COMPARED TO OTHER PARTS OF WEST AFRICA, IT ISN'T HALF BAD.
ARE YOU ***SURE*** ABOUT THIS, CINDY? FROM WHAT I RECALL, HE WAS NEVER THE MOST... ***TRUSTWORTHY*** OF FABLES.
OH, I DON'T INTEND TO ***TRUST*** HIM, BELIEVE ME.
I INTEND TO ***USE*** HIM, IVAN.

AS FAR AS IVAN KNOWS, THE MAN WE'RE LOOKING FOR IS STILL USING THIS OLD HOTEL AS HIS BASE OF OPERATIONS.
OF COURSE, IVAN'S INTEL IS A FEW YEARS OUT OF DATE, BUT IN MY EXPERIENCE, ONCE A SPIDER FINDS A NEST THAT SUITS IT, THEY DON'T TEND TO LEAVE.
HELLO?
ANYBODY HOME?
I'M SORRY, BUT WE DON'T HAVE ANY VACANCIES.
PLEASE LEAVE. *IMMEDIATELY.*
HE SAYS PLEASE, BUT I CAN TELL IT WASN'T A **REQUEST**.
WE DON'T NEED A ROOM. WELL, WE ***DO,*** BUT WE'LL SETTLE FOR A FEW MINUTES OF YOUR BOSS'S TIME.
THIS ***IS*** A MOST UNEXPECTED SURPRISE.
I WOULD HAVE CALLED AHEAD TO LET YOU ***KNOW*** WE WERE COMING, BUT...
BUT I WOULDN'T LET HIM.
SPIDERS DON'T HUNT, AS A RULE. THEY BUILD TRAPS, AND LET THEIR PREY COME TO **THEM**.

FROM WHAT I KNOW OF HIM, ANANSI IS NO DIFFERENT.
PLEASE, IVAN DURAK, NO NEED TO APOLOGIZE.
YOU AND CINDERELLA ARE MORE THAN WELCOME IN MY HOME.
IT'S BEEN A WHILE, ANANSI. I'M FLATTERED THAT YOU REMEMBERED ME.
I MAY BE OLDER THAN THE HILLS, BUT NOT SO OLD THAT I COULD FORGET BEAUTY LIKE YOURS, MY DEAR.
COME, MY FRIENDS. I INSIST THAT YOU STAY FOR DINNER. I'M SURE THAT WE HAVE MUCH TO DISCUSS.
SUCH AS WHAT BRINGS YOU ALL THE WAY HERE TO MY LITTLE CORNER OF THE WORLD.
ANANSI IS ALL CHARM AND GRACE NOW. BUT I REMEMBER OUR LAST ENCOUNTER TOO WELL TO BELIEVE A WORD OF IT.

Rome, 1985.
IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A SIMPLE MISSION. A "MILK RUN," BIGBY CALLED IT.
I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER.
BIGBY HAD GOTTEN WORD THROUGH BACK CHANNELS THAT A HIGH-RANKING MEMBER OF THE SHADOW FABLETOWN WANTED TO **DEFECT** TO OUR SIDE.
ROME IS LOVELY, IS IT NOT?
MY JOB WAS TO MAKE CONTACT WHILE THE WOULD-BE DEFECTOR WAS AT A PEACE CONFERENCE IN ROME, AND MAKE ARRANGEMENTS TO GET HIM OUT OF THE COUNTRY.
NOT AS LOVELY AS A TREE.
BUT LIKE A TREE, ROME'S ROOTS RUN **DEEP**.
THE CODE PHRASE AND RESPONSE WERE ALL IN ORDER. I'D FOUND MY MAN.
MY NAME IS CINDERELLA, MR. ANANSI. I'M TO BE YOUR **ESCORT**.
PLEASE, CALL ME ANANSI.

THE *PLAN* WAS FOR ME TO ESCORT YOU DIRECTLY TO THE TRAIN STATION.
YES, YES. BUT THESE DOCUMENTS I HAVE HIDDEN IN MY HOTEL SUITE ARE *INVALUABLE.* AND IT WILL TAKE BUT A MOMENT TO RETRIEVE THEM.
I KNEW IN MY GUT IT WAS A MISTAKE TO DEVIATE FROM THE PLAN, BUT I WENT ALONG WITH IT ANYWAY.
AFTER ALL, THE WHOLE REASON THAT BIGBY WANTED TO HELP ANANSI DEFECT IN THE FIRST PLACE WAS TO GET INTEL ON THE SHADOW FABLETOWN.
IF I LET VALUABLE INTELLIGENCE SLIP THROUGH MY FINGERS, BIGBY WOULD HAVE MY HIDE.
THIS WAY, CINDERELLA. AS I SAY, IT WILL TAKE BUT A MOMENT.
MY SUITE IS JUST UP THIS CORRIDOR.
BUT REMEMBER WHAT I SAID ABOUT SPIDERS AND THEIR PREY?
I'D MANAGED TO FORGET IT, BUT I REMEMBERED PRETTY DAMN QUICK.
JUST THROUGH HERE, MY DEAR.

JUST LIKE A SPIDER'S PREY, I'D WALKED **RIGHT** INTO A TRAP.
LET ME GUESS.
YOU NEVER HAD ANY INTENTION OF DEFECTING, DID YOU?
AND WHY **SHOULD** I? WHEN MY COMMUNITY OFFERS ME EVERYTHING I COULD EVER DESIRE, AND **MORE.**
NO, THIS WAS NEVER ABOUT DADDY LONGLEGS OVER THERE. IT WAS ALWAYS ABOUT **YOU,** CINDERELLA.
I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN.
NOW, LAST TIME WE MET YOU SAID YOU HAD SOME **QUESTIONS** FOR LITTLE OLD ME?
WELL, THIS TIME I'VE GOT A WHOLE **MESS** OF QUESTIONS FOR YOU.

Burkina Faso, Now.
SO AFTER WALKING INTO ONE OF ANANSI'S WEBS BACK IN THE '80S, WHY AM I DOING IT AGAIN NOW?
BECAUSE HE'S MY BEST BET ON TRACKING DOWN DOROTHY, AND I'M WILLING TO DO WHAT IT TAKES TO FIND HER.
BESIDES, THERE'S ALWAYS BIGBY'S EIGHTH RULE OF ENGAGEMENT: IT ISN'T A TRAP IF YOU WANT TO GET CAUGHT.
OH, THIS IS NICE. IT'S A SHAME THAT IT TOOK MADAME MENG'S UNTIMELY PASSING TO BRING US TOGETHER, BUT I DO SO ENJOY COMPANY.
SAID THE SPIDER TO THE FLY...
WELL, BEFORE MENG'S "UNFORTUNATE PASSING," SHE MANAGED TO INDICATE THAT YOU MIGHT KNOW HOW TO CONTACT DOROTHY GALE.
I MIGHT JUST, AT THAT.
ALLOW ME TO MAKE SOME INQUIRIES, AND I'LL SEE WHAT I CAN FIND OUT. AND IN THE MEANTIME, I INSIST THAT YOU BOTH STAY HERE AS HONORED GUESTS IN MY HOME.

ANANSI SET US UP WITH A DELUXE SUITE IN HIS HOTEL. NOT TOO SHABBY, I'LL ADMIT.
ARE YOU SURE THIS IS *WISE,* CINDERELLA?
NOT REALLY, NO. BUT IT'S OUR BEST OPTION AT THE MOMENT. TRY TO GET SOME *SLEEP,* AND WE'LL SEE HOW THINGS DEVELOP.
I HAVEN'T SLEPT SINCE LEAVING THE FARM--*HOW* MANY DAYS AGO NOW? BUT I'M TOO TUNED UP TO RELAX.
11:15 PM
I JUST LAY AWAKE FOR HOURS, WAITING FOR THE OTHER PROVERBIAL *SHOE* TO FALL.
2:30 AM
I MUST HAVE DOZED OFF AT SOME POINT, SINCE THE NEXT THING I KNOW I'M AWAKENED BY THE SOUNDS OF MUFFLED VOICES FROM THE OTHER ROOM.
THUD THUD
7:52 AM
AND *THERE'S* THAT OTHER SHOE DROPPING, ALL RIGHT.

SORRY TO *WAKE* YOU, MY DEAR, BUT I HAVE GOOD NEWS.
I WAS ABLE TO MAKE CONTACT WITH MISS GALE IN THE NIGHT, YOU'LL BE HAPPY TO KNOW.
SOMEHOW, THE PRESENCE OF ARMED THUGS IN MY ROOM DOESN'T STRIKE ME AS "GOOD NEWS."
YES, WELL.
UNFORTUNATELY-- FOR *YOU,* AT LEAST-- SHE IS WILLING TO PAY A *HEFTY* PRICE FOR THE TWO OF YOU.
I'M *SHOCKED.*
LIKE I SAID. IT ISN'T A TRAP IF YOU *WANT* TO GET CAUGHT.
To Be Continued!